



*Dr Hudson is one of Australia's leading experts on breakthrough thinking and innovation. He founded The Idea Centre in 1996 and has researched or worked with more than 50 organisations including Wrigleys, DuPont, Smiths Snackfoods, Kellogg's, AMP and The Disney Channel. He is also a lecturer at the University of Technology, Sydney, where he teaches a post-graduate subject called Marketing Creativity. Jennifer Granger joined the Idea Centre as brand innovation director in 2005, and was formerly a strategic planner with George Patterson Advertising. Contact The Idea Centre on 02 9665 6762 or email ken@ideacentre.com.au*

## Brainstorming with consumers.

**Ken Hudson** and **Jennifer Granger** look at the need for a fresh approach to delivering innovation.

According to the latest research on what makes a great brand, “consumers are rejecting brands that fail to show them something new and exciting” (*Eye on Australia 2005*). Consumers and retailers alike want brands to be more inventive and innovative.

With this premium on new ideas, are the techniques and processes that marketers use really delivering breakthrough ideas and innovation? The standard process of exploratory research followed by a brainstorm with the marketing/agency team to create ideas (let's say for new products), followed by concept testing with consumers, poses two problems:

1. A brainstorm with the client and agencies can still get locked into patterns of thinking. There's usually a history of sound, logical decisions that have been made on a brand. It's probably not the first brainstorm for the team on this brand either. There might even be ideas that sound similar to something that was tried, but didn't work before. So, it's a hard ask to think up ideas not thought of before. And the voice of the consumer at this stage? Well, it's sometimes lost in myriad insights that have the distinct feeling that they are about everybody and nobody.

2. Testing rough but fairly predetermined concepts on consumers, while valid, is a bit like trying to organise a party for a friend, but only asking them what they would like after you've done all the work. How much room do they have to move? The thinking has largely been done for them. What's left is either outright rejection or 'tweaking'.

We have found that to get fresh ideas from radically new starting points, we need to use a

fresh process. It's a complementary process to research. Market research (e.g. focus groups) is always vital, but how we go about it is up for debate because the current methods are not delivering enough true innovation for brands, enough of the time.

In providing new lateral tools for brand development, we've turned the process on its head and developed Australia's first Creative Consumer Panel that is used at the very beginning of the process, not the end. We've smashed through the focus group glass window and put three very different types of people together to invent new solutions: the client, their target audience and a special group of consumers who are highly creative thinkers adept at creative problem solving. We can make this claim because all of the panel members have scored highly in the Idea Centre's Original Thinking Test. The Creative Consumer Panel has been used by businesses such as Heinz, Unilever and Simplot.

We have found that working with creative consumers requires a number of fundamental shifts in mindset. To start with, consumers become your partners in the innovation process; you co-create with them. To work creatively with consumers, you have to be right in there among them to hear and feel every nuance, to read body language.

Another convention that we have overturned is the power of the group. In our process we have found that a creative group is built from the individual up. Our work starts with the individual's ideas and interests; then later we work up to the group to enhance those ideas. In this way, you design many more starting points and perspectives. Another advantage of this

approach is that individuals or consumers working together can work at their own pace and if the energy level is high they can continue.

Another integral part of brainstorming with consumers is our use of creative thinking tools. For example, we often begin our sessions with asking consumers what words they typically never associate with a product or service. Then you use this to create potentially new propositions. In this way you try and escape the prevailing logic and genuinely explore new territory.

We also ensure that as part of the process, consumers genuinely enjoy themselves. They tell us they get a big kick out of doing the Original Thinking Test and this sense of play continues throughout the session. It's both productive and enjoyable. In this way, consumers and brand managers are relaxed and better able to really communicate. This leads to better and bigger ideas.

In comparison with concept testing, the moment you ask people to judge something they engage their rational, conscious minds and it is very difficult for them to escape this mindset. Hence, the traditional focus group session can become critical and defensive rather than leading to exploration and new possibilities.

Brand and business leaders have a golden opportunity to grow revenues, to lead not follow their consumers. To do this requires that they challenge many of the techniques that have worked in the past. We have found brainstorming with consumers at the idea generation phase is a very powerful complementary tool to the research process as a way to develop rich, powerful insights, ideas and new business opportunities. **M**